Lafayette Historical Society
Newsletter
PO Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549
Vol. XXII, No. 2

President: Marechal Duncan (283-6812)
Newsletter Editor: Jane Spangler (472-0158)

(April 1995)

ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING AND POTLUCK

Tuesday, May 9, 1995 at the Veterans Memorial Hall in Lafayette located on the corner of First Street and Mt. Diablo Boulevard

***HAPPY HOUR* 6:00 p.m. *DINNER* 7:00 p.m. *MEETING* 8:00 p.m.**

SPEAKER: Rose Scudero
SUBJECT: Una Soria Segreta (A Secret Story)

Rose Scudero's talk is about the internment of Italians during World War II, and it is still secret from many Italian families in the Pittsburg-Antioch area. She will describe her part in the preparation of an exhibit on this subject which was to be shown locally but has ended up on a nation wide tour.

For those of you who are new to the Annual Potluck or those that can't remember the specifics of the dinner itself, the L.H.S. Board members will be bringing the desserts and ask all others to please bring a hot dish or salad to serve eight. Thank you and we look forward to seeing you at the Veteran's Memorial Hall, on May 9, for the festivities!

NOMINATIONS FOR BOARD MEMBERS

Nancy Flood

Shirley Thomson

Jop Van Overveen

Elly Conrad

1994-95 Officers and Committee Chairs

President.....Marechal Duncan
V.P. & Tours and Programs.....Diddo Clark
Rec. Scty. & Book Sales.....Ruth Dyer
Corr. Scty. & Membership.....Oliver Hamlin
Treasurer.....Sheila Piriano
Historian & Walking Tours....Bill Wakeman
Plaza Park.....Ray Peters
Archives & Displays.....Wlbur Somerton
Oral History.....Nancy Flood
Newsletter Editor & Publicity....Elly Conrad
Newsletter Mailing.....Frances Hunt
Newsletter Mailing.....Ruby Sturman
Fire Engine.....George Wasson
Annual Pot Luck.....Richard Johnson
Without Portfolio.....Jop Van Overveen

President's Message

It's that time again when we are approaching our annual membership meeting and our Potluck Dinner. That date is the second Tuesday in May, May 9 this year.

According to our by-laws, the membership will vote on a list of candidates submitted by a nominating committee consisting this year of Ruth Dyer, Oliver Hamlin, and Bill Wakeman to fill the expired terms of the directors who have served their terms on our Board. Each director serves for three years with one third of them being elected each year for continuity.

Our featured speaker this year is Rose Scudero of Antioch who, I understand, has a very interesting subject, "The Secret Story." We should all look forward to an enjoyable evening and socializing with friends.

I wish to thank Jane Spangler, our Newsletter editor this past year, for a job well done (this is her final newsletter), and welcome Elly Conrad, our new permanent editor and publicity chairperson.

The L.H.S. has recently joined the Conference of California Historical Societies. We hope to benefit from their vast resources to improve our Society and to be of more service to our community.

Our appeal for new members has brought a few new members whom we certainly welcome and hope will become involved. Please invite your family and friends to our Potluck Dinner as potential new members or just for an enjoyable evening.

Marechal N. Duncan

Marechal Duncan

In Memory of Robert Thomas McNeil

by Bill Wakeman

Robert T. McNeil, a descendent of the earliest Yankee settlers in the Lafayette area, died March 19, 1995, with services held Friday, March 25, 1995.

Bob's great grandmother, Elizabeth Jane Allen, became a member of Elam Brown's wagon train from Missouri to California at the site of the present city of Reno, Nevada where she was born. Jane's father, Andrew Allen, became so ill with prairie fever, he was left at Fort Hall, Nebraska. Jane's mother died during child birth so Jane was cared for by her aunts and grandmother, Margaret, who had just become a widow. The wagon train crossed Donner Summit just days before the Donner Party. In October 1846, Elam Brown married Margaret Allen and on July 1, 1847 bought the 3300 acre Rancho Acalanes in the Fall of 1847. Elam, Margaret, and Jane settled in Happy Valley in February 1848.

When she was thirteen, Jane met William McNeil, who was born in Londonerry, Ireland. They married three years later and their child was Robert Elam McNeil. He married Gertrude Thomson, niece of Peter Thomson, the local Blacksmith. Robert E. and Peter Thomson were on the original Board for the Lafayette improvement association that acted as a political advocate for Lafayette in not letting the county supervisors do as they wished with the Lafayette area. The McNeils owned and operated the Pioneer Market on Plaza Way.

Gertrude's and Robert's first son Stuart married Mary Rebecca Edwards of King City and they owned and operated a dairy, at the present address of 240 Lafayette circle. Their second son was Robert T., born March 23, 1927 in Oakland. He married Barbara Soukup forty-four years ago and they have three children, Nancy A. Royle, Kathleen J. Cawley, and Timothy J. McNeil. Bob was a truck dispatcher for Sequoia Trucking Co. for thirty years.

The Fire Engine -- "Old Betsy"
by: George Wasson

This is an article written as though it was an interview with the "fire engine" known as "OLD BETSY" and as though George Wasson was talking with the engine.

G.W.-Thank you for granting this interview with me. I understand that you have been around Lafayette for a number of years, is that true?

BETSY-Yes. I came to Lafayette in the early 20's when I became the first "motorized" fire engine for the Lafayette Fire District; then a volunteer group of residents of Lafayette. As a Model T Ford, I was one of the newest of available engine driven equipment then available. Before I arrived fire fighting was done with horses, wagons, manpower and whatever was available. I served the Lafayette District for more than 10 years when I was replaced by more modern equipment as was needed in Lafayette. You have to understand that Henry Ford only sold a chassis with engine, the making of a "fire engine" was left up to the owner. I don't know whether Lafayette made me into a fire engine or whether they bought me from someone that had created my fire engine additions. There are plenty of us Model T fire engines around even today; I'm sorry to say that many of the others are in much better condition than I. One is shown on a postcard from Harrah's collection; I would like to look like that engine, but that would be impractical.

G.W.-What did you do after serving the Lafayette Fire District?

BETSY-There were several owners after the fire district; I was with the fire district until the mid thirties. At one time I was owned by the Lafayette Jaycees and later by John Penn who did quite a bit of restoration on me. There is a picture of me as I looked in 1950 at the ' Festival Parade in Lafayette. If you compare that picture to me as of today, I don't look too different. We Model T's weather well and stand many forms of mistreatment. In the 1950 picture, I don't have a windshield or a fire siren, those were added later in my life. My wheels, body and engine are just about the same now as they were then; and that is my problem!

G.W.-How did you get to where you are now?

BETSY-In April of 1977, Tony Lagiss (a long time resident of Lafayette) discovered me in the "junk" collection of Earl Sanko who had acquired me by some route and I was sitting in one of his barns that were then where the Pleasant Hill Civic Center buildings are now. Through the efforts of Tony and others including Hub Anderson, Mike Roberts, Norman Tuttle, Sr., Percy Whitten and others, my status was brought to the attention of the Lafayette Historical Society and the Lafayette City Council. Earl Sanko was willing to sell me to anyone (he had an offer from a buyer in Montana) but he agreed that Lafayette should have the first chance. After much consideration, the Historical Society put up the "seed" money and invited others to participate. Bill Eames (Bill's Drugs) was a major contributor. I was then acquired by the City of Lafayette and put in the "loving hands" of the Historical Society. I have spent time resting in the garages of many of Lafayette's residents and have participated in many of Lafayette's parades and other events.

G.W.-What is your present condition?

BETSY-You can't keep a Model T down, but parts do wear out; some of those parts are difficult to replace. I've had a paint job (about 15 years ago) on my body as it was and I've had several engine parts replaced. Right now, I'm not movable because my drive shaft between the engine and the rear axle has stripped a coupling. That is being replaced with new parts. My rear axle has several grease leaks due to deterioration of grease seals and I have a broken brake shoe. Those parts are replaceable. My engine needs a "work over" involving rings, bearings, and gaskets; those parts are available. What I really need is some enthusiastic people who want to know how to keep and maintain a Model T and, perhaps most important, I need a permanent place to live. It would be nice to have a home in the form of a replica of a vintage fire station where I could be seen and touched as well as be in a place to be repaired. We Model T's don't quit, but we need to be loved and revered. Little children love us but it takes adults to know how to do our repairs.

G.W.-What do you think you need now?

BETSY-Support by the people of Lafayette in the form of dollars. There are Model T experts that can assist in the repairs that are difficult, but there are lots of little jobs like polishing my brass that takes little skill but lots o elbow grease. I intend to stay in Lafayette a long, long time and I hope that you all want to keep me here!

Summary: If you want to help with restoration and revitalization of BETSY, see the request for contributions with this Newsletter or call George Wasson at 284-4603.

REMEMBERING "PERCY"

by Pat Whitten

Percy Ewart Whitten, or just "Percy" as he was known around town, died February 11, just eleven days before his 98th birthday. He was born in San Francisco in 1897 and lived a few years in Skagway, Alaska. He lived most of his life in Berkeley, moving to Lafayette in 1964.

He was always active in his community and in Lafayette was a member of the Lafayette Historical Society, the Chamber of Commerce, the Lafayette Design Project, the Lafayette Senior Recreation Center, the board of the Chateau Lafayette and many Masonic groups. Percy had many hobbies, but planting trees was his favorite. He replanted his own timber property long before reforestation was popular. Many of the trees he gave to the school districts in Lafayette and Moraga and the city are still growing. He propagated Dawn Redwood trees and gave them to parks and cities in Northern California and British Columbia.

At the young age of 80, Percy took up water color painting, painting mostly landscapes. He was a world traveler, driving to Canada in a Model T Ford and later flying around the world in a jet plane. Percy was Lafayette's Citizen of the Year in 1974 and will always be remembered by the Lafayette Historical Society and the Lafayette community.

COMMEMORATING VIRGINIA ANDERSON

by Jane Spangler

On October 30, at the age of seventy-seven, Virginia Anderson passed away. Virginia was a very active Lafayette community member. As an original signer of the constitution and by-laws, Virginia helped to build a foundation for the Lafayette Historical Society. Throughout the 70's Virginia worked as the membership chairperson and encouraged others to get involved with their community.

For over twenty years, Virginia brought beautiful flower arrangements for L.H.S.'s annual Potluck and what better person to bring flowers than one who was a member of the Lafayette Garden Club. In fact, Virginia's love for nature can be seen at the Lafayette Trailside Park which is dedicated in memory of her and her husband Imo.

"She was truly a wonderful person and always seemed to have a warm smile on her face...." Dick Johnson
"She was a wonderful neighbor and my whole family appreciated her company...." Mary Lou Van Galder

LIST OF L.H.S. LIFE MEMBERS

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Marechal and Doris Duncan
Ruth Dyer
Robert and Elinor Fisher
Ned and Mary Flanders
Joseph and Jane Gregory
Oliver and Virginia Hamlin
John and Nancy Holtzapple
William and Mary Ann Hoisington
Rex and Lorrain Kaufman
Jean Kindall
James and Jane Moore
Ray and Barbara Peters
Lee and Lois Schell
Robert and Frances Schroder
Christine Schreiber
Ellen E. Snyder
Bill Somerton
Joseph (Jop) and Irene Van Overveen
Bill and Bonnie Wakeman
George and June Wasson

In Remembrance of Irma Somerton

With sadness we note the death of Irma Somerton, long-term Lafayette resident and librarian. She and her husband, Wilbur Somerton, were among the earliest members of the Lafayette Historical Society and were serving on the Executive Board. As Archives Chairman, she was working with other expert volunteers on a major, professional updating of our archives. Irma Somerton was the catalyst, and largely due to her high standards and expertise, serious researchers now use the historical files. She also gave generously of her talents in working with adults and in particular with children, to whose welfare she was dedicated.

The Lafayette Historical Society extends its deep sympathy to Wilbur Somerton and to all the Somerton family in their loss.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND RENEWAL FORM

last name | first name | spouse's first name

street address | phone number

city, state, zip code | date

ACTIVITIES OF THE SOCIETY

- Collect, preserve, and make available to researchers and the public Lafayette's records, historic materials, photographs
- Disseminate historical information and encourage public interest in local history through programs, exhibits, field trips
- Provide care and maintenance of Lafayette's early fire engine, "Old Betsy"
- Identify and place markers at historic sites
- Publications
- Conduct walking tours
- Record and maintain oral histories

Annual dues: Please check appropriate line indicating amount of dues payable, attach your check in the amount shown--adding any contribution you can make toward the fire engine repair fund--and mail to **Lafayette Historical Society, PO Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549.**

_____Student membership- $ 2.50
_____Family membership- $ 10.50
_____Business membership- $ 50.00
_____Life Membership- $ 100.00

DUES $_____
Contribution to help maintain fire engine _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED: $_____

Please indicate your areas of special interest

___Archives
___Landmarks
___Fire engine
___Telephone Committee
___Annual potluck dinner committee
___Research
___Other: _____
___Oral History
___Photograph Collection
___Newspaper Clippings
___Walking Tours
___Displays

First Class Mail

Lafayette Historical Society
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, CA 94549

Shown above is a picture of "Old Betsy" in 1980, with Hub Anderson in the drivers seat. Please refer to page 4 for our feature article about this wonderful fire engine and its history in the city of Lafayette.